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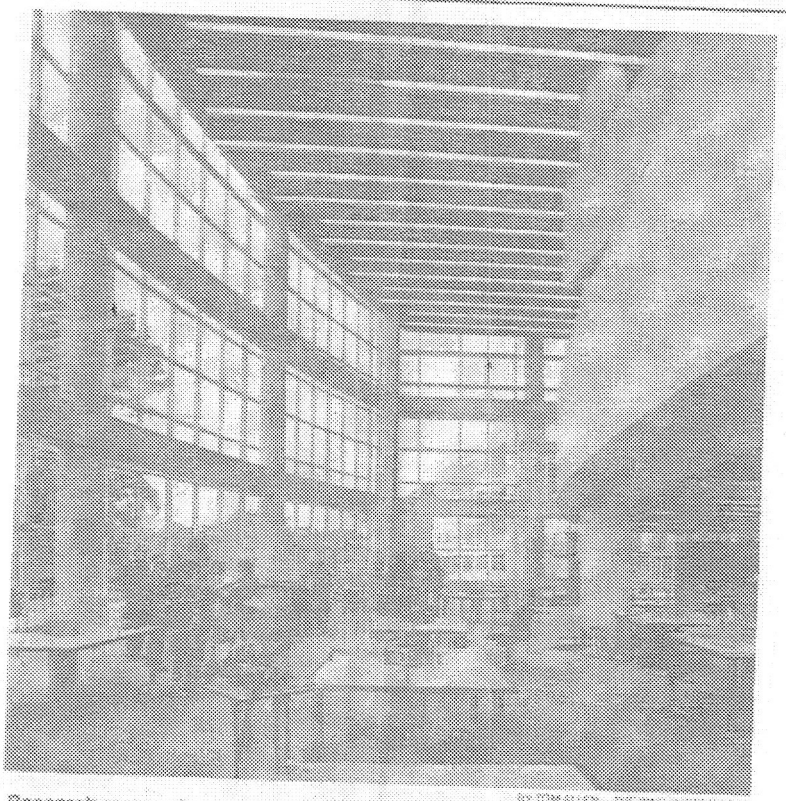
Archives Trail to Md. One for the Records

Lawmaker's Fast Work Snagged Plum for P.G.

THE WASHINGTON POST



BY TOM ALLEN—THE WASHINGTON POST

Research rooms at new Archives building are designed to be light and airy.

By Bill McAllister
Washington Post Staff Writer

John Berry, an aide to Rep. Steny H. Hoyer (D-Md.), went to a reception in the Rayburn House Office Building for a drink and hors d'oeuvres one spring night in 1986 and went home with news of the biggest plum the federal government has dropped on the Washington suburbs in decades.

Berry overheard at that reception a woman boasting that a huge National Archives building might be headed for Northern Virginia. Her words set Hoyer and Maryland state officials on a frantic sprint. Within days, they had diverted the project from Fairfax County to Prince George's, the home of Hoyer's alma mater, the University of Maryland.

The switch was proof, Berry said last week, that in the highly competitive race for federal projects on Capitol Hill, "Loose lips sink ships."

On Thursday, Hoyer and an array of Maryland officials will dedicate the 1,104-foot, green-windowed archives building next to the university golf course in College Park. Known as "Archives II," the $289.6 million building, which will house 600 federal employees and 150 to 200 contract workers, is almost half the size of the Pentagon and the fourth-largest federal building in the Washington area.

Hoyer said he believes the Archives, with its storehouse of government records, will become "the crown jewel of Prince George's County," evidence that the county is no longer "the poor sister of the Washington suburbs."

Researchers from around the world will go there to study—whether maps from Lewis and Clark's 1804-06 expedition to the Northwest, Eva Braun's personal snapshots of Adolf Hitler, the white ceramic coffee mug Liberace gave Richard M. Nixon, or some of the billions of other federal documents and records stored on 520 miles of motorized shelving in climate-controlled vaults.

Designed with "earthquake joints"—in case a temblor hits the Washington area in the next 100 years—Archives II is described as a state-of-art facility with a built-in computer network. Scholars will enter though air locks designed to keep out airborne contaminants and work in one of five atria shielded by green-coated windows that protect documents from the sun's ultraviolet rays.

For workers used to the crowded, aging National Archives Building on The Mall, "this is going to be like heaven," said Adrienne Thomas, deputy assistant archivist. The downtown building, built in 1934, will remain open with exhibits of the Declaration of Independence and other famous documents, genealogy exhibits and pre-World War II government records, but much of the serious research material, including most post World War II government records, will move to College Park.

Perhaps even more remarkable than the building is the speed with which Hoyer, a former Prince George's County state legislator, moved to clinch the project for what was then his district. It was no more than four weeks from the night that Berry learned of the project that University of Maryland officials agreed to lease the 33-acre site to the federal government, Berry said. The agency had been trying—and failing—for more than a decade to get a new records facility, but when the deal was finally cut—it was with lightning speed.

Hoyer played down the idea that he stole the project from the early favorite, George Mason University in Fairfax. "Virginia was really never particularly engaged in this process." A spokeswoman for George Mason University said Friday that the institution had no knowledge it was ever seriously considered.

But Frank G. Burke, who in 1986 was the acting deputy archivist in charge of the newly independent National Archives and Records Administration, said a the George Mason University site was raised during a discussion he had that year with Rep. Frank R. Wolf (R-Va.) and others on Capitol Hill.

"They asked the usual questions and said . . . that's going to be very expensive," Burke recalled. "I said: 'I don't think we need it downtown.' " That prompted a discussion of where the project might go, and Burke said Wolf suggested George Mason, then in his district.

Wolf said through a spokesman Friday that he did not remember raising the issue. Wolf's aide Will Moschella, said that the congressman did not view it as his job to lure federal facilities to his district. "The agency should move where the agency can get the best bang for the buck," said Moschella.

Burke, who lived in nearby Annandale, said he didn't like the idea initially because the Mason campus was "at the end of one of the world's longest parking lots, Braddock Road." But he recalled as he left Wolf's office one of the congressman's aides cautioned him with a laugh: "If Steny Hoyer ever hears about this, you'll end up in Prince George's County."

Unlike Wolf, Hoyer went after the project to bring federal jobs to his county. "I had to be a real activist," he said. "Prior to 1984-85, Prince George's County had been ignored. All the federal agencies either wanted to be at 1601 or 1604 Pennsylvania Avenue. Their next alternative was to be in Fairfax County, and the next favorite was Montgomery County. Yet we had the largest number of federal employees. We had the best prices for land."

Hoyer wanted to change the county's image, and Berry knew that the archives building was a live prospect and a way to achieve Hoyer's goals.

"I was so excited" after the cocktail party "I could hardly sleep that night," he said.

The next day, when he appeared at Burke's office, Berry told him, "We want you to come to Maryland. With Hoyer on your House Appropriations subcommittee and Barbara Mikulski [D-Md.] on the Senate Appropriations subcommittee, there is no way you are going to Virginia."

Berry said Burke's response was: " 'We would move anywhere. Nobody has been able to deliver for us for 20 years.' " The closest the Archives had come to finding a new home for its growing mountain of records was in the mid-1970s when a five-level underground storage facility was proposed across Pennsylvania Avenue from the Archives' longtime location between 9th and 7th Streets NW. The agency then was part of the General Services Administration and Burke said a top GSA administrator nixed the idea.

Hoyer's thoughts, turned immediately to his school, and he called John S. Toll, then president of the state university system. Hoyer told him if the university would come up with the land he might be able to provide the archives. "Toll went crazy, saying, 'This has got to be the biggest thing since the land grant for the university . . . If I have to knock down Byrd Stadium for you, you will have land,' " Berry said.

Toll, now head of a national association of 80 research universities, can't recall promising to raze the football stadium, but he said he was excited and instantly realized the impact the archives could have on the school's academic reputation. "We would do what any institution wants to do: make its location the center for scholarship," he said.

Meanwhile Burke, frustrated over the Reagan administration's failure to find an archivist to run the agency, had tried to generate support on Capitol Hill. But after Berry's visit, he said, "All of sudden, I found myself being invited to lunch with the administration of the University.".

At that lunch he was stunned to discover: "They were selling us."

At Hoyer's urging, the university had located a couple of sites for Burke to consider. Maps lined the walls and they toured the sites. "We had a very nice lunch," Burke said.

When it came time to negotiate, "Hoyer's staff pretty much took over . . . ," Burke said. The archives long had needed a new building. Its annexes in Alexandria and Suitland leaked. A fire at the Maryland facility had destroyed a number of valuable photographic records.

The need for a new facility was clear. What wasn't, was the type of facility. Hoyer resolved that issue by adding an amendment to an appropriations bill giving the agency $6 million to plan the building.

Two years later, in 1988, the agency had a plan in hand, but the Office of Management and Budget objected to its cost. Hoyer again worked through the House Appropriations Subcommittee on Treasury, Postal Service, and General Government and secured passage of an unusual piece of legislation that allowed the archives to sell "trust certificates" in its name to finance construction of the project.

Certificates, worth $301.7 million, were to be paid off with annual appropriations spread over 30 years. The OMB didn't like the innovative financing method, but, as Berry put it, the agency "winked" and the bonds were sold in the summer of 1989. "Basically, we have a mortgage," said Thomas.

The new building is not perfect. A month ago, an electric coil in an area designed to hold films at low temperatures overheated, setting off a sprinkler system that flooded a portion of the Nixon presidential collection and some maps before it was discovered by guards. Officials said they cannot place a dollar estimate on the damage and workers were able to restore many of the damaged documents.

Berry said there is one more thing he still would like to do before Thursday's dedication: find out who the woman was who was chatting about George Mason University that night. "To this date," he said, "it's a mystery, but I would like to send her a thank-you note."

ARCHIVES AT A GLANCE

■ **MISSION:** Establish policies and procedures for managing U.S. government records.

■ **HISTORY:** The National Archives of the United States was created in 1934 and joined the General Services Administration in 1949. It was renamed the National Archives and Records Administration in 1985 when it became an independent agency.

■ **HEADQUARTERS:** 7th Street and Pennsylvania Avenue NW.

■ **BUDGET AND STAFF:** $193 million for fiscal 1994; approximately 3,000 employees.

■ **ARCHIVES II:** The 1.7-million-square-foot building occupies a 33-acre site in College Park and employs 600 workers.

It contains 691,572 square feet of records storage, 104,200 square feet of laboratories, 520 miles of shelving and 10,828 map cases.

In 1996, after additional records have been transferred from the main archives and the Washington National Records Center in Suitland, it will store 631,534 cubic feet of textual records; 45,000 cubic feet of cartographic and architectural records; 38,000 cubic feet of motion pictures, audio tapes and video tapes; 15,000 cubic feet of still pictures; 1,400 cubic feet of electronic records and the 35,000 cubic-foot Nixon presidential collection.

—Compiled by Barbara J. Saffir

SOURCES: National Archives and Records Administration, U.S. Government Manual